

to belong to nobody/ He tried to satisfy himself with feminine friendships, but they had a way of hovering unhappily on the brink of something more. 'I have', he writes to Mrs. Leadbeater, 'though at considerable distances, six female friends, unknown to each other, but all dear, very dear to me.' The distances did not always remain so considerable. In his sixtieth year he was even accepted by one young woman, only to recoil himself on second thoughts. That was unfortunate; but he was needlessly contrite, one feels, at having thereby caused Miss Ridout to reject a young man, who was 'an excellent match in every respect except a certain weakness of intellect'. He did not, however, escape the criticism of others. 'The cake was no doubt very good', observed one lady, 'but there was too much sugar to cut through in getting at it.' An old squire was blunter: 'Damme, Sir, the very first time Crabbe dined at my house, he made love to my sister.' It is an old story—laurelled age and laughing youth, Corneille and Mademoiselle du Pare, Goethe and Bettina, Ibsen and his Princess of Orangia: it would be very comic, if it were not tragic. Yet it is strange to find something so naive and *doucereux* in Crabbe of all men, 'Nature's sternest painter, yet the best.' So much harder is it to sum up a human being than bio-graphers often suppose. It was no mere softening of old age; the sturdy resolution of forty years before was still

his; in 1818, when he supported the
unpopular candidate
at Trowbridge and a hostile mob
threatened to tear his
chaise and him to pieces if he went to the
poll, the old
rector replied that they might kill him if
they chose, but
while he lived he would vote, and passed
through their
midst unharmed. A common-sense Liberal
to the last,
he died on the eve of the Reform Bill in
1832.
Naive, yet shrewd; straightforward, yet
sardonic; blunt,

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